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## Will Duxbury Buy the Farm?

Land trust inks deal for 142-acre O'Neil farm, Duxbury asked to pay portion of \$4.3M price tag

By KEITH L. MARTIN

A local land conservation group is asking Duxbury residents for \$1.5 million from the town's Community Preservation Act funds to help preserve the O'Neil farm. The total price tag for the 142-acre property is \$4.3 million.

The Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts will maintain ownership of the property, which would be preserved as a working dairy farm.



**Mark Primack** Split by Autumn Ave., O'Neil Farm may be an unknown to many Duxbury citizens.

Those who drive by its green beginnings might never know that the property contains a working farm 40-cows strong, producing milk that goes into producing the cheese they buy in stores. The land also features a lush scenery of forest and wetlands and the sight of various wildlife from a myriad of birds, including hawks, to deer.

While all of these sights may be a mystery to the average Duxbury citizen, the Trust



**HOW NOW BROWN COW?** Showing her support for preserving agriculture in Duxbury, at least one young citizen enjoys watching cows at O'Neil Farm. It will be older voters, however, who'll get the last say in deciding whether to invest \$1.5 million of town funds to keep the farm alive and preserve its land.

is trying to ensure that everyone gets to see what the farm has to offer now as well as in the future.

On Saturday, Mark Primack, executive director the non-profit organization

announced an agreement with the farm's owners, former Duxbury Fire Chief Carl O'Neil and his brother Edward's heirs, to make the multi-million dollar purchase.

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# Wildlands Trust in Agreement to Buy O'Neil Farm

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The biggest financial challenge in the regional land trust's history, the organization is hoping that protecting the land will be a partnership, however, and is looking to the town of Duxbury to also play a part in preserving the last working farm on the South Shore.

"This is a big challenge to do this, but to help keep agriculture safe in Duxbury and on the South Shore is worth it," said Primack. "The South Shore used to be full of agriculture, but today that is no longer. This is what's left in the entire [area]."

To ensure that this "developer's dream," is not lost, said Primack, the Wildlands Trust is expecting financial assistance from Duxbury's Community Preservation Act funds as well as a state agricultural program to make sure the dream isn't built over.

## O'NEIL FARMS - BY THE NUMBERS

**Established:** 1800

**Size:** 142 acres (74.41 acres off Winter St., 65.15 acres off Autumn Ave.)

**Total tillable crop area:** 28 acres

**Total woodland area:** 74.6 acres

**Pasture area:** 35 acres

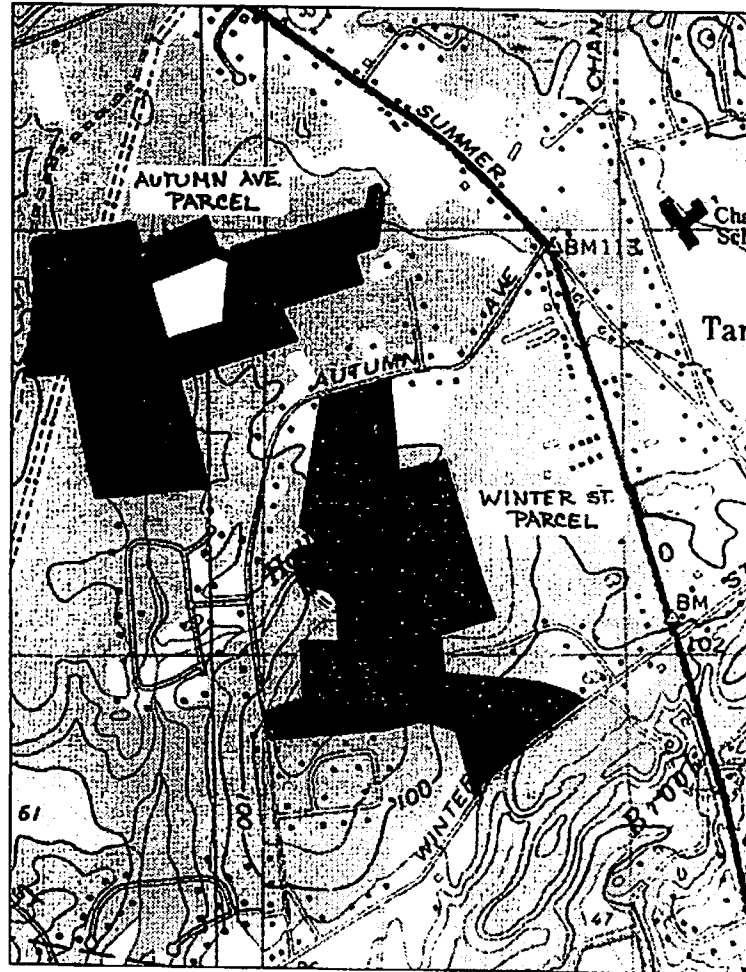
**Livestock:** 70 cows (44 of which give milk)

**Assessed value:** \$1,295,936 (Autumn Ave.: \$797,436, Winter St.: 498,500)

**Pricetag to Wildlands Trust:** \$4.3 million

**Contributions (estimated):** \$1.5 million from Duxbury CPA funds, \$500,000 from Massachusetts Agricultural Preservation Restriction program, \$2.3 in private, charitable donations

**Funding deadline:** June 30, 2004 - first \$2 million; June 30, 2005 - balance



the Trust is getting a bargain in purchasing 142 acres of Duxbury land for \$4.3 million, because if sold to developers it would easily sell for six to eight million dollars, he predicted.

In addition to preserving a working farm on the land, Primack said the Trust's goals are also to create an educational opportunity for children in learning about agriculture, preserve the wildlife and open space features of the land, preserve the historic nature of the farm (created in 1800) and a house on the property that dates back to the 1750's, as well as creating walking and biking trails for people of all ages to enjoy.

"This is a partnership between the Trust and the O'Neil family and heirs, between the town of Duxbury and the Trust and between all of us [to preserve this land]," said Primack.

#### **Where Duxbury Fits In**

With \$4.3 million to raise and a deadline of June 30, 2004 to close on the property with half that amount, Primack said that funding will come from several sources. Primack said a deputy commissioner for the state's Agricultural Preservation Restriction program recently visited the farm and said it was a prime candidate for up to \$500,000.

According to Primack, the Trust plans to ask the town for \$1.5 million in CPA funds, which requires the town to use this money for three priorities: open space, historic preservation and affordable housing.

"We expect, hope and believe Duxbury will be our partner in this," said Primack. "They passed the CPA for [these three reasons] and we are hitting two of those three with this project."

The rest of the money will come from major gifts and a community campaign — of

which the Trust already has \$900,000 in commitments.

To secure these funds, the Trust must make a formal presentation and application to the town's

Community Preservation Committee which oversees the funds. The committee must then recommend the release of funds at Town Meeting for approval by voters.

According to CPC Chairwoman Holly Morris with no formal presentation made to the group as of yet, she couldn't speak for the committee regarding O'Neil Farm.

Personally, however, Morris said the preservation effort is very exciting.

"It's important for us to develop clusters of open space...for wildlife to thrive and it's nice to see that there is an effort to maintain a working farm there," she said.

Unlike most CPA-funded projects, however, the town will not own O'Neil Farm, but instead help to purchase a conservation restriction that will maintain it as open space and preservation space in perpetuity, a main priority of The Wildlands Trust.

Morris cites the King Caesar House renovations as an example of a CPA project the town funded but did not own.

"The town doesn't own [that property] but it 'has an interest,'" she said. "The language of the CPA says you don't necessarily need to own the property, but you need to have an interest in it."

Morris added that while the farm and house on part of the property could be considered historic, this purchase would most likely fall under the open space provision of the act.

Primack said that per Carl O'Neil's request, no housing be put on the property and that instead it be maintained as open space and a working farm for people to benefit from.

To approve the use of CPA funds, the town must vote on the proposal at town meeting, which will most likely happen next spring.

According to Pat Loring, a CPC member and Duxbury's liaison to the Trust, with so much to be done in raising funds and making presentations, the proposal will most likely require a special town meeting after the annual March meeting.

With her unique – and conflicting – position as both committee member and liaison, Loring said she has discussed with CPC members, selectmen and own counsel recusing herself from town boards during the process of securing funds for purchasing O'Neil Farm to avoid a possible conflict of interest.

For the past few months, Loring has met in executive session with several committees to make them aware of the Trust's intent. These sessions, she said, were merely informational since the project is in its preliminary stages.

As Duxbury grows, said Loring, it is important to protect land while at the same time making sure that land left for development isn't 100 percent built on.

Citing the educational prospects of the farm to citizens young and old as well as a great preservation of open space, Loring said that she can't imagine Duxbury voters would turn down the proposal at Town Meeting.

"I can't contemplate that," she said. "Duxbury voters have been unanimously in support of open space projects in the past. They voted to adopt the CPA and this is an example of what they wanted the money to be used for. They won't be footing the bill for the whole thing,

about [them voting this down]."

As for perspective from town officials, both Selectman Elizabeth Sullivan and Town Manager Rocco Longo said they have nothing to say about the proposal at this time.

Selectman Andre Martecchini said on Monday that while the project is very exciting and the land is worth preserving, there are still several questions to be answered.

One of these questions, he said, is the use of a large amount of town funds for property Duxbury won't own.

"Obviously, it is a large chunk of CPA money being requested which would very likely deplete that fund, so we'll discuss that," he said. "In most large purchases like this we get some ownership, so that is also something to talk about. But on the other hand, we couldn't afford to buy it anyway, so maybe this is the next best thing."

### **Maintaining a Thriving Farm Environment**

Carl O'Neil has lived in Duxbury for his entire life, working on the farm that has been in his family since 1800 and also serving with the town's fire department. Retiring from firefighting in 1993 after 30 years, including 10 as fire chief, O'Neil has spent each day of each year tending to the farm and its dairy production.

Of the 70 head of cows O'Neil grazes on the farm, 44 produce milk. This milk is sold to the Agrimark farmers cooperative that produces Cabot cheese.

After the death of his brother Edward in 2001, O'Neil said he first gave serious consideration to working with The Wildlands Trust to preserve the family land for the purpose it has maintained for over 200

years. "I'm getting older and can't drag my feet," he said. "If something happened to me, this might not happen."

So O'Neil contacted the Trust and set up the purchase and sale with the signed agreement of his brother's heirs to sell the property, but under some of his own terms.

One of these conditions was that the land remain a working farm and not just another field and forest in town.

To help preserve the agricultural nature of the land, O'Neil himself is putting one million dollars of the sale's proceeds to endow a charitable trust which will oversee the farm's operations for years to come.

It's O'Neil's wish to remain as operator of the farm, keeping equipment up to date and renovating the historic home to prepare for his eventual successor.

O'Neil's charitable trust will also establish a board of directors who will ensure the land is being used per his wishes and that of the conservation restriction. This board, said Primack, will most likely contain a cross section of farmers, conservationists and Duxbury citizens.

Duxbury's Conservation Administrator, Joe Grady, said that having a non-profit group running the farm is a wonderful idea.

the town nor the Trust has the ability to focus on the workings of the farm on a day-to-day basis," he said.

"Walking around the farm, you get a sense of what Duxbury looked like 100 years ago," said Grady.

Primack added that O'Neil was very clear that the whole 142 acres go to the Trust and not just one piece.

"We looked at the possibility of selecting from the lots to lower the [purchase] price and he said 'I'm giving you people a bargain sale and I'm giving you one million dollars so don't nibble around the edges [of the property].'" said Primack.

So with a June 2004 deadline to raise the first two million dollars, Primack said the Trust will continue to go all out and make sure that they reach their goals for O'Neil Farm. In the event they cannot raise all of the funds, he said, it will not necessarily be a lost battle.

"If we raise half the money, we'll still get the conservation restriction on the land, so if we fail, we still succeed in protecting this land," said Primack. "Donors have asked me about not raising all of the money and I tell them that it works in two chunks: the first is to protect the land and the second chunk is to do all of the wonderful things like the educational components and trails. This is our generation's opportunity to give something to the kids and to history and it starts today."

## A Tour of O'Neil Farm



Cows currently graze freely on parts of the 142-acre O'Neil Farm and hopefully will for years under the proposed sale to The Wildlands Trust.



Carl O'Neil (left) discusses the farm's history with Duxbury's Conservation Administrator Joe Grady. Grady brought his two children to see the farm during Saturday's press conference announcing with The Wildlands Trust's interest in purchasing O'Neil's property.



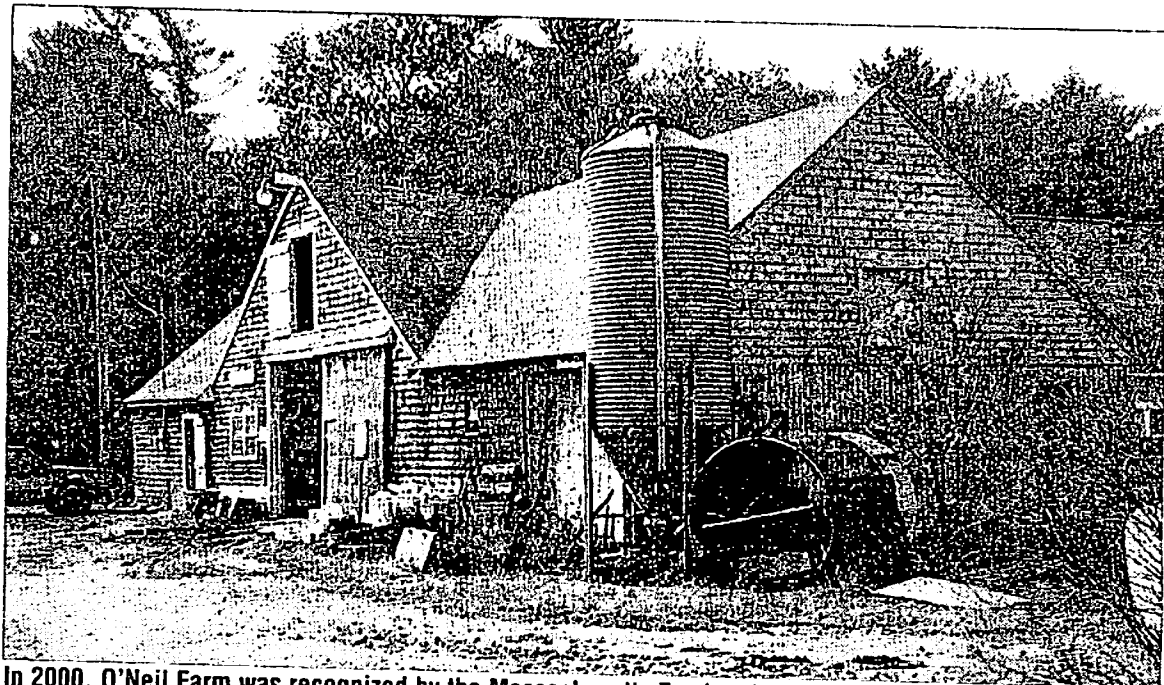
It is Carl O'Neil's wish that children continue to learn about agriculture and how a farm runs for years to come on his family's land.



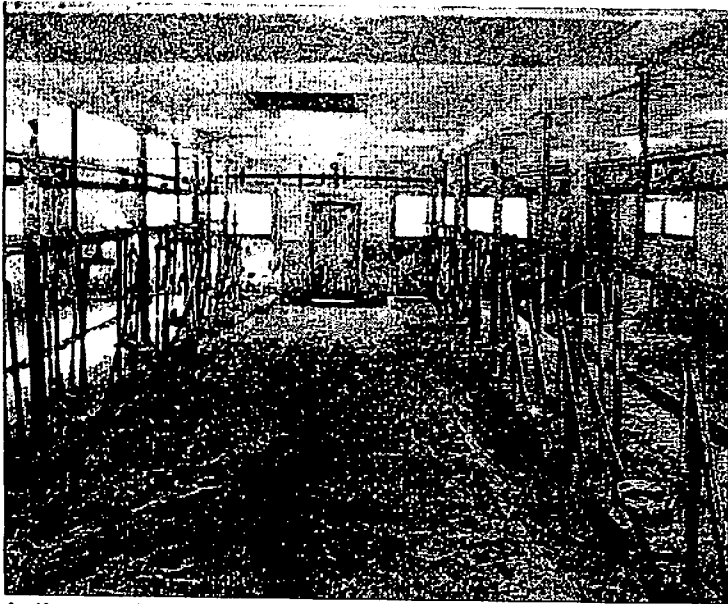
Of the 70 cows O'Neil currently grazes on his property, 44 give milk which is used to make Cabot cheese.



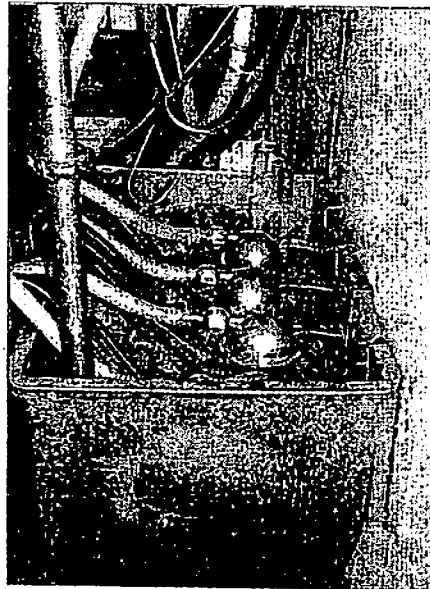
As the only crop on O'Neil Farm, hay is cultivated to feed the cows.



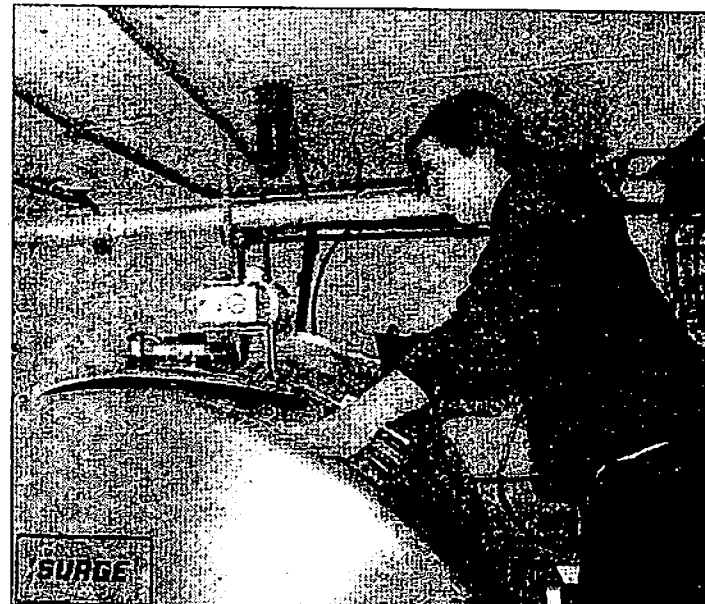
In 2000, O'Neil Farm was recognized by the Massachusetts Food and Agriculture as a "Century Farm" for being a piece of the state's agricultural history for over 100 years.



In these stalls at O'Neill Farm, cows are milked twice a day.



Water is run through these pipelines after milking to keep the lines clean.



Inside this bulk milk tank, the liquid is quickly cooled to 38 degrees Fahrenheit and stored.